

BRITISH FORCES IN EGYPT.
THE 1932 1 PIASTRE RED & BLUE POSTAL SEAL IMPERFORATES

Peter R. Feltus (ESC 114)



Fourteen years ago a London auctioneer (Sotheby's, 10th April 1986) sold 45 imperforate sheets of the British Forces 1 Piastre Postal Seal, as one lot. They fetched £9,900, or £220 per sheet of 80 stamps. I wondered who bought them and when they would reappear in the market. Four years later I found some answers. Harmers of London, at their stand at Stamp World London 90 in May, sold a sheet from the hoard for £400 to a collector friend who saw it first. He wanted only the top quarter, and offered me the other 60 stamps for £400, to get his portion free. Of course I agreed, and I implored Chris Harmer to get more such sheets for me from the consignor.

But in July, when I was home again in California, he called with bad news. There was a misunderstanding; the consignor intended that the stamps sell for £400 per block of four, not sheet, and expected payment on that basis. (Well, £400 per sheet was too good to be true, but £400 per block is surely too much. Such blocks were offered by two dealers at the exhibition at that price; I think they didn't sell.) Chris Harmer implored me to return as many of these stamps as possible, for a refund, to reduce his impending big loss. I had already sold three blocks for \$80 each so, frustrated and unhappy, I returned the remaining 48 stamps and the original buyer returned his quarter sheet.

Chris Harmer, being very grateful, promised to send both of us his future auction catalogues, gratis, for the rest of our lives. As these imperforates are now rather common, much commoner than perforated blocks are, I think it an ethical, financial and philatelic pity that the consignor offers them as though they are rare.

At the David Feldman auction of February 1999 in Zurich, another sheet from the same consignor was sold (this one with five faulty stamps), and I bought it for SFr 1495. Since then I have offered blocks of four for \$95 and panes of 20 pro-rata, and they sold readily. Before selling them, however, I consulted the best published study of these stamps to see how the sheet might reveal additional information. The result is surprising. John E. O. Hobbs published the second edition of his book *British Forces in Egypt Postal Service, 1932-1940* in 1984. Pages 16-23 are devoted to this, the first of the British Forces issues. He described and illustrated the differing characteristics of the 20 positions in each pane, and explained, but incompletely, how the four panes differ and are arranged. Hobbs showed an imperforate quarter sheet in the book (the right-hand half of the top half of a sheet); he never saw a whole sheet. I expected that with my imperforate sheet I would quickly answer the remaining questions in Hobbs's treatment of this issue. It didn't happen. The matter is not simple. In fact, it is baffling.

Page 20 is an illustrated list of the plate flaws shown on a pane of 20, each one designated C (constant, appearing on four stamps in the sheet of 80) or SC (semi-constant, appearing on fewer stamps). These semi-constant flaws are key to figuring out whether panes (and some smaller multiples) are from Pane I (positions 1-20) or Pane 2, 3, or 4 (positions 21-40, 41-60, or 61-80). Hobbs noted semi-constant flaws on positions 1, 9, 12, 14, 15 and 20. My sheet should confirm and extend Hobbs's findings, but no. In light of what I see, his quoted plate flaw descriptions should be amended thus:



Position 1 (61) Position 9 (69) Position 14 (74) Position 15 (4x)

1 SC Base of the two outer top right Triangles missing. Actually, it is the bases of the two outer top left (rather than right) Triangles that are missing, and this is in Pane 4 (position 61) on my sheet.

9 SC No dot after FORCE. Though the dot was missing in blocks that Hobbs thought to be from Panes 1 and 2, the dot is missing only in Pane 4 (position 69) on my sheet.

12 SC Dot on inner side of outer circle of Badge opposite second T in Institutes. Hobbs says this is in Pane 2 (position 32), but it isn't anywhere on my sheet.

14 SC Right side of top ornament of Badge "very feint and broken". Hobbs thought this appeared in Panes 1 and 2, but it is only in Pane 4 (position 74) on my sheet.

15 SC Dot below left corner Triangle in SE corner. This is constant (appears four times) on my sheet.



Position 20 Position 40 Position 60 Position 80

20 SC Inner angle of ornament in bottom right corner broken. Hobbs thought this broken ornament appeared in Panes 1 and 2 and 3 or 4, and was right; it is in Panes 1, 2 and 4 (positions 20, 40 and 80) on my sheet. I note that the breaks differ; if these differences are constant (showing up on other sheets), then it seems that the four Panes can be differentiated by this alone, so I show them all here.

20 SC Dot in fourth outer Triangle above SE corner. This is not anywhere on my sheet.

So, what is the layout of the sheet? Hobbs thought that what he called Frame B is Pane 1, his Frame A is Pane 2, and his Frames C and D remained unfixed. In my sheet Panes 1 and 2 are interchangeably his Frames B and C, Pane 3 is his Frame D, and Pane 4 is his Frame A.



The top half of the imperforate pane.



The bottom half of the imperforate sheet